

## Why Carmel will consider closing schools

### Carmel

Declining enrollment is sparking discussions

#### Emma Kate Fittes

Indianapolis Star USA TODAY NETWORK

Carmel Clay administrators have started early discussions about closing, renovating or redistricting elementary schools to deal with the area's expected drop in students.

A 2016 demographic study forecasted the district would no longer have the rapid growth it saw in the 1990s, instead seeing its enrollment level off before starting to decline.

Interim co-superintendent Roger McMichael said during a workshop meeting on Wednesday the district already has nearly 300 fewer students than its peak in 2011. By 2020 it is expected to have more than 400 fewer students, and almost 900 fewer by 2026.

"Many people are very surprised when they see these numbers, or numbers like this, because we are all aware of construction, particularly on the west side of Carmel," he said. "What is not as noticeable is the outward migration (of school-aged children.)" That would mean in 2026, if no changes are made, the district would have about 1,400 fewer students than its capacity, McMichael said, or the equivalent of two elementary schools.

"It's not reasonable to think you are going to be right at capacity," he told board members. "But you probably don't need 1,400 empty seats."

In a state where funding is tied di-

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rectly to the number of students in a district, that could quickly become a financial problem. Carmel received about \$5,900 per student this year. At that rate, losing 900 student would be a loss of more than \$5 million.

McMichael said it costs about \$1.2 million just to operate an elementary school each year, including about \$150,000 for utilities, \$240,000 for administrators and another \$440,000 for teachers in specialized areas, such as art and music, for which there is typically one per school.

Any money saved on building costs is instead put towards classrooms, he said.

Another issue is the district's current school layout, which is geographically lopsided. There are seven elementaries east of Meridian Street and four west, but there are only about 700 more students on the east side. And the west side of the city is currently seeing more growth, with newer neighborhoods.

“It’s inevitable, in my mind, that with the current location of schools, these students will need to push east,” McMichael said.

He presented a few hypothetical solutions to board members.

They were:

- Closing Orchard Park while renovating Carmel Elementary
- Closing Carmel Elementary while renovating Orchard Park
- Building a new school on the district’s open 35 acres near Clay Center Road while closing an existing school
- Keeping all 11 elementary schools, but redistricting to move students east Orchard Park, built in 1955, and Carmel, built in 1961, are the oldest elementary buildings in the district. They underwent major renovations in 1992 and 1988, respectively.

The district hasn’t built a new elementary since West Clay was finished in 2006.

McMichael emphasized that this is just the start of a long conversation. Parent meetings are scheduled at Orchard Park and Carmel elementaries on April 19 and 25, respectively, and at all three middle schools in early May.

First, McMichael said the district and community needs to decide how many elementary schools are necessary. After gathering public input, McMichael said he would bring a recommendation to the board for consideration, which would take at least a month. Any actual work would not be completed for another three years, he said.

“It’s only when I believe I have an understanding of what the vast majority of the stakeholders support, only then will I make recommendations to the board,” McMichael said.

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IndyStar North: Get Hamilton County news delivered to your inbox He also said that no matter what project is decided upon, the changes would not raise the tax rate.

The district has already planned to issue a \$36.4 million bond in 2020, which would replace another debt that’s expiring.

Jessica Barrett, who’s child is currently attending Carmel Elementary, said she understands why this would come up. She also has a child at Towne Meadow Elementary, so said she has seen first-hand the vast difference in the newer buildings.

“I’m not freaked out because I do understand how there could be declining students in what I’m going to call the ...original Carmel area,” she said. “Whatever happens, as long as they put the same type of equipment and siding and that sort of thing as one of the other newer schools, then it’s a win for everyone, even if it’s a little bit uncomfortable with the redistricting.”

Barrett said she would like to know if the redistricting would affect the middle schools and whether students could be grandfathered into staying put, because that would increase how many of her children would be affected.

Redistricting middle schools was not suggested in Wednesday’s board discussion.

Teacher union president Pete O’Hara said, after talking with McMichael on Tuesday, he assured teachers the plan is for no one to lose their job. They may, however, be moved to a different grade or building.

As far as the potential closures, O'Hara said, "We're okay with that. It makes sense. It makes fiscal sense. It's a responsible thing to do."

Overall, he said the decline in enrollment isn't cause for great concern.

"Carmel is still a pretty vibrant, thriving community," O'Hara said. "We are going to continue to have a pretty big, thriving school district. I don't think there's any room for concern in our community."

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